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THE MYTHS OF REORGANIZATION.

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A GROUP OF MORE THAN 80 BUSINESSMEN AND INDUSTRIAL LEADERS (LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION) CONDUCTED A STUDY OF OHIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND RECOMMENDED ACCELERATED REORGANIZATION AND CONSOLIDATION AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. IN ORDER TO IMPLEMENT THE COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS, HOWEVER, IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO DISPEL SEVERAL MYTHS. THE FIRST MYTH (UNITARY CONCEPT MYTH) CONSISTS OF THE BELIEF THAT OUR SCHOOL DISTRICTS EXIST FOR SOME SINGLE UNDEFINED PURPOSE AND FURTHER DISCUSSION IS PRECLUDED UNTIL THIS PURPOSE HAS BEEN CLEARLY IDENTIFIED. RESEARCH, HOWEVER, INDICATES THAT DISTINCT ADVANTAGES EXIST IN EDUCATIONAL UNITS LARGER THAN MANY SMALL DISTRICTS. THE SECOND MYTH CONCERNS THE MAXIMUM SIZE (SIZE LIMITS MYTH) TO WHICH A DISTRICT SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO GROW. SINCE IT IS RATHER EASY TO DEFINE A SYSTEM AS TOO SMALL, PROPONENTS OF THIS MYTH OFTEN DEMAND AN EQUALLY PRECISE DEFINITION OF AN OVERPOPULATED SYSTEM. FAILURE TO DEFINE A SPECIFIC UPPER LIMIT IS A WEAK ARGUMENT FOR NOT TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SERVICES A LARGER DISTRICT COULD OFFER. THE THIRD MYTH (TRANSPORTATION MYTH) EXPRESSES ITSELF IN THE FEAR OF AN UNREASONABLE RISE IN TRANSPORTATION COSTS WITH INCREASED STUDENT INFLUX FROM OUTLYING COMMUNITIES. IN ACTUALITY, THOSE DISTRICTS WHICH HAVE REORGANIZED HAVE FOUND THAT TRANSPORTATION COSTS RISE NO MORE RAPIDLY THAN OTHER EXPENSES. THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN THE "OHIO SCHOOL BOARDS JOURNAL," VOL. 12, NO. 2, FEBRUARY 1968. (DA)

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THE MYTHS OF REORGANIZATION

The Little Hoover Commission has spoken. The message was comprehensive and penetrating. Follow-up action is a certainty, action that will speed the rate of change in a number of education's problem areas. One area certain to be spotlighted for further action is that of school district reorganization. And it will not be an easy matter.

The Little Hoover Commission spoke to the State of Ohio and the case made for further school district reorganization is convincing. The commission's credibility is high for its recommendation is cast against a national backdrop which, according to the United States Office of Education, notes a ten-year reduction in local school districts from 55,000 to 23,461 as of September 1966.

Any examination of the Ohio situation shows a corresponding decrease in the number of school districts. Between 1950 and 1966 school districts in Ohio decreased from 1,462 to 712.

The move toward fewer and larger school districts is clear at both the national and state level. Why, then, did the little Hoover Commission find it necessary to make further school district reorganization one of its prime recommendations? The answer appears to be rather clear. First, despite the gains made in the past, further school district reorganization will increase the efficiency of district operation, and second, the pace at which further reorganization will be brought about will be much too slow unless emphasized and given a boost through the Commission's report (see boxed copy, page 12).

There are those who believe that the reorganization accomplished thus far has occurred in those districts where resistance to change has not been great and that much more difficulty lies ahead as efforts are made to reconstruct districts that have resisted effectively in the past. The basis for much of the resistance merits examination. Persons who have worked closely on reorganization issues in the past note that the opposition to merger is not rooted in a reorganization proposal, but in a mythology that has developed over the years and which rather automatically surfaces whenever reorganization is discussed.

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Let us examine three commonly verbalized myths which serve to impede school district reorganization. One, that our school districts exist for a single something, as yet unidentified, and until that something can be pinned down firmly there is no use talking about district reorganization. This myth will be reffered to as the "unitary concept" myth. Two, that proponents of school district reorganization, when defining a school district as too small, must also, to be fair, define with equal precision the school district which is too large. This myth will be referred to as the "size-limits" myth. Three, that school district reorganization will cause school transportation costs to rise beyond reason. This myth will be referred to as the "transportation" myth.

The Unitary Concept Myth

Defenders of small school districts often assume the role of objective men and counter each effort toward school district reorganization with the question, "What is the thing we really want our schools to do?" The presumption evidenced by such ovjective men is that small school districts will merge into larger districts just as soon as the question can be answered and evidence produced that what we really want can best be achieved through larger districts. But this produces a disouraging situation, for the poser of the question in attempting to defend a small district, always assumes a myth. His myth is that there exists a unitary measurable greatest good to be derived from our schools. This is in sharp contrast to a reality which suggests that schools are designed to do many things for many pupils, and thus, there are numerous measures of advantages found in larger districts.

When proponents of district reorganization patiently enumerate the many advantages resting with districts of greater than minimal enrollment, they do so in the knowledge that to each advantage, defenders of the small-district status quo will counter with the question, "Is this the thing we really want our schools to do?" This question is impregnable for no single advantage is the thing, the sine qua non, which of itself clinches and seals all arguments insomuch as no such single thing can exist.

As long as the proponents of school district merger list many benefits and the defenders of any district's current status call for a single overriding proof, little progress can be made. The singular question simply does not match the plural answers, even though the answers are rooted in reality. There are numerous studied which indicate that certain advantages reside with educational units substantially larger than the many small

districts which currently operate. The evidence has been documented; the bibliography is long. Nevertheless, no evidence can emerge to lay to rest all opposition. All of which calls for another question: "What to do in the face of such a myth?"

Perhaps the thing to do is to stress the fact that no encompassing unitary factor can exist in a school system of many purposes and turn the question on the questioner, "What are the things you really want the very small school system to do?" By forcing the defender of small systems to enumerate, he may be chased away from his unitary concept myth. Further, as he lists the things he wants his school system to accomplish he will be setting the stage for a comparison of isolated factors of education, as they are treated in both large and small districts.

The Size-Limits Myth

Many large city school systems enroll over 100,000 pupils. Many small school districts enroll but a few hundred. Occasionally the disadvantages of small districts are somewhat blunted by intermediate district services and by area vocational schools. Nevertheless, small school districts do not generally possess an enrollment base large enough to justify employment of the specialists needed to man a school system. Nor do they control a budget that can assure attracting specialists to the system. Generally, when curriculum diversity is attempted in small districts, it results in employing more teachers at lesser salaries. Thus the weaknesses of small districts are exposed, causing many citizens to claim, "Those districts are too small."

Defenders of small districts, when appealing for a definition of the too-large district, appear to possess an irrefutable logic and a keen sense of fair play. When legislative or state authorities attempt to establish size limits below which districts will not be permitted to operate, the defenders immediately shout, "If you define the limit which establishes a school district as too small, you must define with equal precision when a district is too large." The American concept of fair play demands the examination of their claim.

Once again the posers of the question are assuming that a myth is true, a myth which assumes that each end of any continuum can be defined with equal precision. But is this actually the case?

The answer is simple. The precision with which limits at one end of a continuum can be defined is not always the precision that can be exercised at the other end of the continuum. Let us look at some examples. Military

commanders can define rather precisely the minimum of troops needed if an army is to accomplish a certain objective. They cannot with equal accuracy define the upper limits—an army too large to do the job well.

A similar inspection of farm or factory again indicates that there are factories too small to warrant continued operation. Cost factors become excessively high. The number of acres or the number of production units necessary to achieve a break-even point can be established within reasonable limits. Upper limits of the enterprise in terms of production units or acres cannot be as easily or as tightly determined.

Finally, put the test to any housewife. The typical housewife can, to her satisfaction, define rather closely the husband's income level below which a satisfactory standard of family living cannot be maintained. She cannot, except in terms that are practically meaningless, define the limits which would establish the family income as too high.

There exists a substantial belief in educational circles that some school systems are too large and efforts are being made to modify the internal structures of such systems so that some functions of the district can be carried on in less than district-wide modules. This suggests that bigness of school districts is also a factor to be recognized. Nevertheless, this of itself is insufficient reason to delay the definition of size limits below which no school district should fall simply because an equally precise upper limit cannot be defined.

The size-limits myth is difficult to dispel. Perhaps the only defense is to question the person who holds out for a strict definition of the upper size limits of a school district about the definition of limits he would place on his personal income. When would it be too small and when would it be too large? He may answer that question, but if he does, he will lose his followers who will have their own notions about income.

The Transportation Myth

In these days of rapid transportation, it is not uncommon for a citizen to catch an early plane in a distant city in order to arrive home in time for an evening meeting at the schoolhouse to discuss a proposed school merger. He may desire to be there in order to block what he considers a foolish notion—the merger of school districts which he believes will increase school transportation costs excessively. This is not an uncommon contradiction, for a myth exists. It is a persistent myth which says the creation of large school districts creates excessive transportation costs unless children are kept on buses for unreasonable lengths of time. This mythology is rooted in our value

system which cherishes frugality, a value system shaped since childhood.

McGuffey's early readers and later editions of spellers and readers incorporated the precepts on which our country flourished. Who doesn't remember those two classic expressions, "A penny saved is a penny earned," and "Pennywise and pound foolish"? Both phrases seem to jolt our current modes of thought for they stand as past wisdoms ready to help us untangle the complex problems of today. Yet those two expressions lifted from our past are at odds with each other, for all too often to save the penny is to lose the pound. When applied to operational costs of school transportation systems, the two statements do, indeed, characterize a dilemma.

The Division of Research of the State Department of Education annually publishes an analysis of education costs. For the 1964-65 school year, the operational costs of educating an Ohio child was $422.44 in cities, $389.11 in exempted villages, and $381.78 in local districts. These figures can be further broken down into component parts. Cities spent 71.1% of their operational costs for instruction. The corresponding figures for exempted village districts and local districts were 69.3% and 69.6%. The lion's share of the cost of operating a school system was reserved, as it should have been, to finance instruction.

When attention is turned to transportation costs a different set of figures emerged. Cities spent only 1.4% of current operational costs for the operation of transportation systems. In the more rural areas served by exempted villages and local systems the percentages were 3.8 and 3.0 respectively. This suggests an interesting question: "Are extreme economies in transportation apt to be made in a fashion which renders the pupil less likely to maximize the larger instructional appropriation made in his behalf?" Put another way, the question can be stated, "Cannot false transportation economies keep a child on a bus so long as to impair the returns to be expected from sizable instructional investments?"

When school district organization is the result of the merging of two or more smaller districts, a reorganization of the transportation system naturally follows. Unless great care is exercised, the result may be long trips on the school bus to the point of impairing the educational gain the merger was established to achieve. Perhaps this is only natural in that school buses—all painted a National School Bus Chrome Number Two—are highly visible. They serve as constant reminders to the taxpayer that taxmoney used for transportation will be minimized as the efficiency of the school

bus fleet is maximized. What the taxpayer may fail to appreciate as he sees a school bus is that savings in transportation are savings in a minor budgetary area and should be viewed as savings only when bus operation does not weaken the instructional program. Transportation systems should be operated in the most economical fashion possible so long as transportation economies do not jeopardize instructional gains.

No reasonable school merger should be negated on the basis of increased transportation costs. In actual practice reorganized districts find transportation costs rising no more rapidly than other education costs. Mergers should be accompanied by an increase in transportation facilities to enable pupils to arrive at school in a condition conducive to work, and be returned home in time to experience a measure of physical activity before beginning homework efforts.

There seems to be little basis to dispute the economist's claim that our economy can be sustained only by a well-educated citizenry. Educational enrichment that accrues from concentrations of pupils will require normal increases in transportation expenditures to insure enriched educational programs just as there are normal increases in other school costs. To do otherwise runs the risk of saving the penny only to lose the pound.

But the myths do persist.

Our heritage which stems from the little red school house is a wonderful thing, although it may have accustomed us to expect our educational facilities to be near at hand. Times have changed our patterns of life. Citizens now drive many miles to urban centers to work at their daily jobs. Similar distances to do the family shopping are also accepted. Few persons complain about distances to be travelled to acquire such enjoyments as the movies or bowling. Sociologists suggest that as the American economy changes, two enterprises remain with the village after all others have moved away; one is the service station--for gasoline is necessary to go to the urban centers, the other is the village tavern. In many communities, educators might add a third to the two of the sociologists; that being the local high school.

Proponents of further school district reorganization would do well to question the myths and the defenders of the myths about district reorganization. After all, it is impossible to define the mythical single thing the merged school district is designed to do, or to define with tight precision the mythical limits which would characterize a school district as being too large. It is also impossible to define what transportation costs ought to be without examining the instructional program which the transportation system serves.

The reorganization recommendations of the Little Hoover Commission are sound. Their implementation requires the abandoning of a mythology.